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The Director of Central Intelligence
Washington, D.C. 20505



National Intelligence Council

NIC 01030/90
23 October 1990

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

Nervous Reformers, Indignant Officers: Prospects for Military Intervention in Soviet Politics

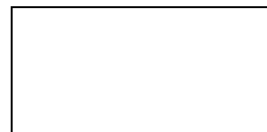
- A tradition of staying out of politics, cleavages within the military, the risks of detection, and difficulties in implementation make the likelihood of a purely military coup very low. Military leaders would be likely to undertake unilateral action only if they perceived the demise of civil authority to be at hand or to have already occurred.
- Recent military activity in the Moscow area is probably connected with harvest support, rehearsals for the 7 November parade, and probable contingency preparations to deal with public disturbances.
- Elite airborne and MVD units are capable of handling localized incidents of domestic unrest, but quelling widespread violence would require the use of regular ground forces, which suffer from growing morale and discipline problems. Use of regular forces to put down large-scale unrest would exacerbate the situation and further degrade the cohesiveness of military units.
- As the economic situation continues to deteriorate, Gorbachev may consider using military forces to perform critical economic tasks or maintain political order by enforcing martial law. The military likely would be only marginally effective in performing such roles for very long.

This Executive Brief presents the findings of Intelligence Community representatives at a meeting held on 9 October 1990. It was produced by the National Intelligence Officer for the USSR and coordinated with representatives of CIA, INR, DLA, and NSA.

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For the past several weeks Moscow has been rife with rumors that the Soviet military is preparing a coup. The persistence of the allegations by spokesmen for the radical reformers has precipitated sharp denials from senior military officials, including Defense Minister Yazov and presidential adviser Akhromeyev, and has spawned countercharges from some traditionalists that radical leftists have been plotting the overthrow of Gorbachev's government.

The rumors have been prompted by a number of factors:

- Political polarization in the capital, exacerbated by a rapidly worsening economic situation, has led to a growing sense of gloom among the populace and created an environment conducive to rumor-mongering.
- Disagreements between Gorbachev and some military leaders over domestic and foreign policy issues has created the public perception that the military is staunchly opposed to all reform and keen on a conservative restoration.
- Recent troop activity in Moscow's environs--attributable in our view to the urgent need to assist in completing the harvest, preparations for the 7 November parade, and probable contingency planning to deal with public demonstrations--has added fuel to an already fired-up public imagination.

The Difficulty of Carrying Out a Military Coup

Although the military is beset with serious internal problems and its leaders deeply

concerned over Gorbachev's policies and the country's future, the prospect of the military attempting to overthrow Gorbachev is very low.

- The military leadership remains imbued with a tradition of subservience to the civil authorities. While Yazov, Chief of the General Staff Moiseyev, and other leaders may question Gorbachev's policies, they have felt obligated to lend those policies their public support.
- The officer corps remains sharply divided over the issue of military reform; even if senior military leaders were planning a coup, their ability to secure the obedience of all the commanders needed to carry out a military seizure of power is extremely doubtful.
- Although the Party and the KGB maintain a strong presence in the military, these organs are also increasingly politically divided; even if traditionalists were to support a military coup, reformist elements would be quick to expose any plotting.

Military forces available to support a coup attempt would be limited in capabilities and numbers:

- Although six airborne divisions, plus one regiment, are combat ready, these units are the most politically reliable and are directly subordinate to the Supreme High Command, i.e., Gorbachev. It would be difficult to conceal from the civilian leadership any effort to elicit their cooperation in a coup attempt.
- Relatively few ground force divisions are anywhere near combat-ready strength (50-75 percent), and these are

deployed along the Soviet periphery. Most units are at 25 percent or less of their wartime strength. Even if the High Command could overcome the many obstacles to mobilization, such a step would tip off civilian leaders to a coup attempt.

- While the number of units in the Moscow area may be sufficient to seize control of the capital, they would be unable to extend their reach much beyond the city. Their ability to maintain long-term control of Moscow in the face of popular resistance would be questionable.

Counterpoised to these constraints are what we believe to be the practical requirements for a successful Soviet military coup:

- The neutralization of those military units likely to oppose a coup, a step that could presage open conflict between military units.
- The rapid seizure of key installations (Kremlin, KGB headquarters, communications and transportation facilities), institutions (Council of Ministers, Supreme Soviets at both the national and republic levels), and individuals (Gorbachev and other key leaders) throughout the USSR.
- The forceful containment of public opposition, a move that probably would lead to widespread protests and strikes, armed clashes and quite possibly--should the military split--civil war.

Overlaying these would be a more general need for the strictest secrecy, a conspiratorial requirement unlikely to be

met in the considerably more open Soviet political environment. Indeed, the high visibility of and the publicity accorded to the recent troop activity around Moscow argues against its being connected with coup preparations.

Unilateral military action in the face of these constraints would probably be attempted only if senior military leaders perceived the collapse of the civil authorities to be imminent or to have already occurred.

What's the Military Up To?

We believe some of the recent military deployments around Moscow were ordered by Gorbachev in anticipation of demonstrations planned by the political opposition. Some units are likely to remain in the Moscow region through the 7 November holiday as a precautionary measure. We do not believe military units will be used to prevent demonstrations; they likely have a limited contingency mission of backing up internal security forces in the event public protests become violent. However, any significant use of the military to quell disorder in the capital runs the very serious risk of aggravating the situation.

- The military leadership likely views the use of its forces in a domestic control role as a "no win" situation: regular conscript-based forces lack the discipline and the training necessary for this task, and the High Command is loathe to use its troops in a role which would further erode public support for the Armed Forces.
- Gorbachev's public and private statements have indicated that he does not believe the use of military force to

eliminate his political opponents or to stabilize the political and economic situation would work. Although widespread disturbances could prompt him to order military units to help restore calm, he is very aware--based on the precedent of Tbilisi--of the potential costs involved.

- He is more likely to use military deployments as "shows of strength" to slow the growth of separatist sentiment--as he did in the Baltic republics--and to deter the spread of domestic unrest.

There is a general consensus among Community analysts that Gorbachev has not exhausted all his options in coping with the growing internal turmoil; for that reason, the use of regular military forces would be the instrument of last resort. He will rely on his presidential powers and use political persuasion and intimidation to try to control events.

Implementing Emergency Rule: An Alternative Scenario for the Military?

Gorbachev could consider using the military in other ways to deal with the country's mounting economic and social problems and salvage a basis for continuing reform. Even among proponents of radical economic reform, there has been some sentiment for Gorbachev to use his presidential powers to implement the changes necessary to prevent the country's economic collapse.

In the event of a breakdown of important elements of the national economy, such as the transportation system, Gorbachev might be persuaded to call upon the military to step in and "run the railroads"

on an emergency basis. In the event of large-scale domestic unrest, Gorbachev could also use the military to restore order by enforcing some form of martial law in affected areas. Such steps would at best be short-term solutions:

- **Popular reaction to such moves probably would be hostile, unless Gorbachev carefully prepared the populace.** He would have to convince his countrymen that mobilizing the military to perform key economic tasks and maintain domestic order would be stop-gap measures designed to save the country, rather than attempts to reverse economic and political reform. The republic leaderships would be especially wary of such developments.
- Although the Armed Forces might succeed for a time, it is unlikely they would be able to run key transportation and other facilities efficiently over the longer haul. Moreover, while the military leadership would probably accede to Gorbachev's orders to step in, it would view the performance of such economic duties as an unwelcome diversion from the Armed Forces' primary mission of defending the country from its external enemies.
- Although the military would be less reluctant to implement martial law in the event of widespread domestic unrest, the High Command probably realizes that such a step risks polarizing the country, further degrading the cohesiveness of military units, and increasing the likelihood of violence.